

Three Cheers for Praise

Sermon preached by Pastor C. John Steer
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No 2: Worship – The Momentous Activity
Scripture: Psalm 98

Almighty God, unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid. Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your Holy name through Christ our Lord. Amen (John Chrysostom)

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In the church in which I was raised in London there was a lovely man call Tom. His nickname was "Mr. Hallelujah" because hallelujah was a word that often came to his lips. If you met him in the street and asked him how he was, he would reply, "Hallelujah, I am doing fine."

At church on Sunday the congregation would be treated to several shouts of "Hallelujah" from old Tom sitting in the back row. When something in the service encouraged him he would just let rip with "Hallelujah!" It startled the visitors but the regulars knew that old Tom was just feeling blessed.

When I started preaching I could always tell if Tom liked the message by the number of times he interrupted with a "hallelujah".

It was like a sermon approval scale from 1 to 10.
10 being the best.

A one hallelujah sermon was a real dud.

A nine hallelujah sermon was a humdinger.

Tom is now in heaven shouting his Hallelujahs around the throne. But he understood the importance of praise in our worship of God for hallelujah means praise the Lord.

As we continue our new series entitled: **Worship – The Momentous Activity** we are going to look at this wonderful dimension of praise. The English word praise can be traced to the Latin "pretium" meaning price.

Originally it meant to set a price on something or to appraise a person or a possession. So whenever we praise the Lord we are placing a great value on him.

Praise is packed with significant spiritual activity.

Here are some of the things that happened in our praise today.

First, and foremost **praise honors God.**

Praise communicates who God is and what he has done.

Second, **God inhabits the praise of his people.**

As we praise God we are creating a place for him to dwell just as his glory once filled the temple.

Third, praise helps us to know God better.

Praise refreshes our knowledge of him.

We come to know God for what we praise him to be.

For example if we praise God as a mighty warrior, our understanding of his power grows.

If we praise him as our father, we gain perspective of his protecting love.

Fourth, praise breaks the enemy's oppression

There is a good example of this in Acts 16 when Paul and Silas are praising God in jail when suddenly all the prison doors are opened and everyone's chains come loose. Praise lifts us out of our own situation so we can better focus on the king of glory.

I hope you have experienced this benefit of praise yourself.

Sometimes I have come to church deeply troubled and burdened by some seemingly insurmountable problem.

Then we begin to praise God together and ten minutes later the problem has been reduced in size as we focus together on the God who says, "With me nothing is impossible."

So all that is happening when we praise God. No wonder Karl Barth called worship "the momentous activity".

But how should we praise God?

What should our praise look like?

Thankfully we are not left to guess.

God tells us how to praise in ways that will honor him and help us. One such passage is Psalm 98.

It is one of the great songs of praise.

It has nine verses that break into three parts of three verses each. Each section has something important to tell us about praising the Lord.

So please turn to Psalm 98 in your Bible and your message outline as we look at these **Three Cheers for Praise.**

CHEER NUMBER 1 describes THE REASONS FOR OUR PRAISE

"Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvelous things; his right hand and his holy arm have worked salvation for him. The Lord has made his salvation known, and revealed his righteousness to the nations. He has remembered his love and his faithfulness in the house of Israel; all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our God." (vs 1-3)

The Psalm begins with the statement **"Sing to the Lord a new song."**

We all enjoy singing old favorites.

It is harder to sing songs we don't know but the Psalmist says it is good for us to sing new songs and he tells us why.

We are to praise God with new songs because he has done **"marvelous things."**

We have a better understanding of these marvelous things than those who went before us. We have the power of the electron microscope and the radio telescope to reveal the wonders of outer space and inner space.

The Psalm then provides a highlight reel of what God has accomplished.

He has **"worked salvation."**

Our praise is rooted in the work of God through Jesus Christ.

It is interesting that the Psalmist said God has "worked salvation **for him.**"

We might think that is a misprint. Surely salvation is for us.

But our salvation is for God's glory. The credit goes to him.

Jesus died on the cross and rose again because it was the Father's will and the Father's pleasure.

Then we sing a new song because he **has made his salvation known.**

The news of God's salvation is moving out in ever widening circles. It begins with the worshipping community in the temple in Jerusalem where this psalm was first sung.

Then it expands to the nations of the world.

We are seeing that fulfilled today as God's salvation is going to places it has never been known before.

There are prophets of doom saying the best days of the church are behind it. Don't you believe it.

Jesus said he will build his church and that is exactly what is happening. The church of Jesus Christ has never been more vibrant than it is today.

That is why these are the best times to be alive.

Let me show you how God is revealing his righteousness to the nations.

Approximately 70,000 people join a church somewhere in the world every day.

Since 1970 the number of Christians in Africa has grown from 120 million to a projected 472 million in 2010.

In Latin America the number of Christians has grown from 261 million in 1970 to a projected 544 million in 2010.

In Asia the number of Christians has grown from 94 million in 1970 to a projected 374 million in 2010.



The numbers of those praising the Lord will continue to grow until one day the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

One day every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Revelation gives us the lyrics of another new song that explains why this is happening.

"They sang a new song: 'You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation.'" (Revelation 5:9)

Now singing a new song challenges us to keep our worship fresh because God is always doing a new thing.

That is why every generation of believers has written new songs.

In the sixth century Gregory the Great invented the Gregorian Chant. Those chants were the contemporary worship of that day.

In the sixteenth century Martin Luther introduced hymns based on popular tunes some of which were German drinking songs.

In the nineteenth century American pioneers developed gospel music on the frontier.

In the 1960's the Jesus People in California introduced bands into worship for the first time.

It is fun to speculate how future generations may be singing this new song. One day the melding of our brain as a biologic interface with computers may be possible. Indeed it is already in its infancy.

In this future world our thoughts and memories could be linked to a visual display in sight and sound, perhaps set to precisely tuned music and lights so that our thoughts of God can be displayed in visual, emotional, and auditory perception for the world to witness.

Imagine coming to church and plugging yourself in and your thoughts about God would be shown on a vast plasma screen for all to see. Of course, it would be embarrassing if instead of worshipping you are wondering how the Vikings were doing at that moment.

So we cheer God in our praise as we celebrate the marvelous things he has done.



Then **CHEER NUMBER 2 IS FOR THE RESOURCES FOR OUR PRAISE**

The Psalmist continues, **"Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth, burst into jubilant song with music; make music to the LORD with the harp, with the harp and the sound of singing, with trumpets and the blast of the ram's horn – shout for joy before the LORD, the King."** (vs 4-6)

These verses describe a variety of ways that we can praise God.

There is the command to **shout** repeated twice.

Now you shout when you are excited.

You shout when something wonderful happens.

Shouting is not something you usually do on your own or in a small group. It needs a big crowd.

I have been in some large gatherings where this has happened spontaneously. A roar of praise has come from the throats of the congregation as they have been caught up with the greatness and goodness of God.

So God gives us permission to shout as a way of celebrating his salvation. This is not an isolated example.

The command to shout is repeated over 100 times in the Bible.

The sons of Korah urges us, **"Shout to God with cries of joy." (Psalm 47:1)**

Isaiah says, **"Lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid." (Isaiah 40:9)**

Shouting is not just for the men at a football game for

Zechariah instructs, **"Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem!" (Zechariah 9:9)** And the women did shout on Palm Sunday when Jesus rode into Jerusalem.

So we too can shout for our King.

Another way we can praise God is to **burst into jubilant song.**

God loves to hear his people sing.

He gave us voices not just that we can sing at birthday parties and baseball games but that we might sing of his blessings.

John Calvin wrote in his preface to his commentary on the Psalms, "In truth we know by experience that singing has great force and power to make and influence the heart of men to invoke and praise God with more vehement and ardent zeal."

It was the Reformation that reintroduced singing back into the worship of the church.

Now I know there are some people who cannot sing for physical reasons. But most of us can. Yet some of us choose not to.

We say, "Singing is not my gift" and we leave it to others.

But we are missing out on a great experience.

I guarantee that if you try, you can learn to sing.

God would not call you to sing his praises if it was beyond your ability. You may never be Pavarotti but you will improve and you will begin to enjoy singing and you may as well get used to it because we will be singing for all eternity in heaven.

And that may not be far off for the Psalm tells us that Jesus is coming to judge the earth.

But perhaps we cannot sing to the Lord, not because we are physically incapable but because we are spiritually incapable.

If we have never experienced God's salvation we obviously cannot sing about it.

So I invite you to receive the salvation that Jesus Christ offers.

How do I receive his salvation?

David tells us in Psalm 40,

"I waited patiently for the LORD; he turned to me and heard my cry.

He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand. He put a new song in my mouth, a hymn of praise to our God.” (Psalm 40:1-3)

There is the answer. Wait on the Lord. Call on his name.
Accept the offer of his outstretched hand.
He will lift you out of the slimy pit.

When God does that we make two great discoveries.
First, our life will have direction and meaning.
For our feet are now on the solid rock of Christ.
Second, we will have a new song in our mouth.
A hymn of praise to our God.

Another resource we can add to the variety of our praise is to **make music to the Lord**.
Music is an ideal vehicle to convey the elation of joy.



The composer Joseph Haydn was asked why his church music was always so full of gladness?

Haydn replied, “I can’t make it otherwise. I write according to the thoughts I feel. When I think upon God my heart is so full of joy that the notes dance and leap from my pen. And since God has given us a cheerful heart I will be pardoned for serving him with a cheerful spirit.”

We see that the music of this Psalm is full of variety.

There is the music of the harp, the sound of the trumpet, and the blast of the ram’s horn.

These were the contemporary instruments of that day.

This is not a command to use those particular instruments but it does give us permission to use the instruments of our own day.

We have here a justification for contemporary music and for using the instruments of our own culture like the organ or the guitar, the synthesizer or the saxophone.

We must be careful not to let music divide the church of Christ.

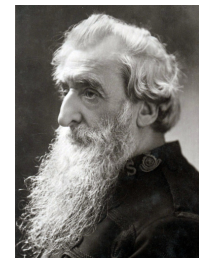
For the purpose of music is to call God’s people together.

How silly it would have been in the Psalmist’s day for the harp player to have criticized the trumpet player and for both of them to pour scorn on the poor chap blowing the ram’s horn. All of these instruments were to be used to make music to the Lord.

William Booth, the founder of The Salvation Army, asked the question, “Why should the devil have all the good tunes?”

There is no reason at all.

Christians have every justification to have the best music for we have the greatest subject for our composition.



Another resource for our praise is clapping.

Here it is the rivers who clap their hands.

In Psalm 47 it is the nations.

In Isaiah 55 it is the trees of the field who clap their hands.

Clapping is an expression of appreciation and respect and jubilation. It is not out of place in the worship of God.

But let us notice it is God who is applauded not the performer.

The third reason we cheer is because of **THE REACH OF OUR PRAISE**

“Let the sea resound, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it. Let the rivers clap their hands, let the mountains sing together for joy; let them sing before the LORD, for he comes to judge the earth.

He will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity.” (vs 7-9)

For the final movement of his symphony the Psalmist acting as the conductor of an orchestra brings in the noises of nature. There is the roar of the sea, the clap of the rivers and the song of the mountains.

Psalm 98 is known as a royal Psalm because it proclaims that the Messiah is King of creation. Everything is to praise him.

In case anyone has been left out the book of Psalms concludes with this statement, **“Let everything that has breath praise the LORD.” (Psalm 150:6)**

This informs us about a dimension of praise we may not have thought about. We might conclude that praise is very personal and private and hasn't much to do with anybody else.

But we are reminded here of the rest of the world, some of whom cannot praise God because they do not know him.

They have never heard of the marvelous things that he has done. And it is essential that they do because Yahweh is coming to judge the people with his righteousness and equity.

So as we are caught up in the joy of praise we cannot forget that there is a world out there that needs to worship God with us.

This great act of praising God becomes a call to mission.

Worship is not to be restricted to a handful.

Rather it is for **the world and all who live in it.**

I began by telling you about my friend Tom, who loved to shout “hallelujah.” I'd like us to follow his example as we rehearse for that day when we will gather around God's throne as his covenant community.

The Book of Revelation describes the worship of heaven.

At the end of chapter five we find the four living creatures saying “amen”.

The meaning here is that the amen was repeated again and again after each statement of adoration.

Then in Revelation 19 we read that the 24 elders worshipped God who were seated on the throne and they cried "Hallelujah".

So I want to try this.

This half of the room will be "Amen"

You are Amen Corner.

The other half will be "Hallelujah"

You are the Hallelujah Chorus.

Now you have to cry out your part as I direct you.

This is not a time for whispering but for shouting.

To do it properly we need to stand.

I am going to read the great benediction of praise from Revelation chapter 5 and I invite you to enthusiastically play the part of the four living creatures and the 24 elders.

To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb

Be praise

And honor

And glory

And power

For ever and ever.

AMEN – HALLELUJAH

AMEN – HALLELUJAH

AMEN – HALLELUJAH

AMEN – HALLELUJAH

AMEN – HALLELUJAH